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# **“Truckdriver Gladiator Mules: Female Vulnerability in *The Color Purple* (1982) and *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982)”**

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**ABSTRACT:**

The following paper proposes the works by Gloria Naylor and Alice Walker as texts depicting vulnerable female characters regarded as the Other due to different causes such as gender, race, class, and sexuality. The paper aims to shed some light on the discrimination suffered by the female characters of these texts. A brief introduction on the female figure and the notions of vulnerability and the Other and a background to Naylor's and Walker's texts is followed by the analysis of the notions of the Other—from Emmanuel Lévinas's and Judith Butler's philosophical framework—and then an analysis of female vulnerability—mainly through bell hooks and Alice Walker herself. The paper, then, analyzes the works by Naylor and Walker from these perspectives, paying close attention to the authors' feminist statements regarding the different issues surrounding the figure of the woman.

**Key words:** vulnerability, the Other, race, gender, sexuality.

**RESUMEN:**

El presente artículo propone las obras de Gloria Naylor y Alice Walker como textos en los que se describen personajes vulnerables considerados como el Otro debido a distintas causas tales como el género, la raza, la clase social y la sexualidad. El artículo tiene como objetivo arrojar luz sobre la discriminación a la que son sometidos los personajes femeninos de estos textos. A una breve introducción acerca de la figura de la mujer y las nociones de vulnerabilidad y el Otro, así como una contextualización de las obras de Naylor y Walker le sigue un análisis de los conceptos de el Otro, usando las ideas propuestas por Emmanuel Lévinas y Judith Butler. A continuación, le sigue un análisis de la vulnerabilidad femenina, principalmente a través de bell hooks y la misma Alice Walker. Así pues, el artículo analiza las obras de Naylor y Walker desde estas perspectivas de pensamiento, prestando atención a las intenciones de las autoras y a las declaraciones feministas de los mismos en cuanto a las diferentes cuestiones que envuelven la figura de la mujer.

**Palabras clave:** vulnerabilidad, el Otro, raza, género, sexualidad.

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#### **DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. The Female Figure: Vulnerability and the Other

Last semester, I took a course on American literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries concerning authors such as Tillie Olsen, Tennessee Williams and Toni Morrison, among others, and topics dealing with empathy, precariousness, the question of the neighbor and hos(ti)pitality, giving an account of oneself, to name but a few of the most relevant ones. In one of the sessions, entitled “Empathy, reproductive heteronormativities, the street” we had to read the story “The Two” from *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) by Gloria Naylor and pay attention to the aforementioned topics taking into account Judith Butler’s ideas in “Bodily Vulnerability, Coalition, and Street Politics.” In class, we also mentioned Alice Walker’s definition of “womanist” from *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*; that is, “a black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children . . . a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility . . . and women’s strength . . . [and a woman who is] committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and female* . . . [who] loves herself. *Regardless* . . . Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender” (xi-xii; emphasis in original). I was so fascinated by Naylor’s story and the analysis we carried out in class that I focused on female vulnerability in the final paper for the course, analyzing the works of Williams, Morrison, and Naylor from this perspective. In this vein, I wanted to explore the issue of female vulnerability in my end-of-degree paper as well.

The following paper proposes the works by African-American authors Gloria Naylor (1950–2016) and Alice Walker (1944–), authors of *The Women of Brewster Place* and *The Color Purple* respectively, and published in 1982, as texts which depict vulnerable female characters—Mattie Michael, Lorraine, Celie to name just a few—because of their gender, race, class, or/and sexuality. These characters embody what is known in phenomenology as the Other; that is, they find themselves in a state of being different to those around them. The paper is a feminist reading of the novels by Naylor and Walker, aiming at analyzing and shedding some light on the discrimination suffered by the female characters of the texts and the strategies these characters use to overcome the discrimination. In the vein of “Bodily Vulnerability, Coalitions, and Street Politics,” in which philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler (1956–) regards “vulnerability as a form of activism, or as that which is in some sense mobilized in forms of resistance”

(99), the works are analyzed by paying close attention to the author's feminist statements regarding the different issues surrounding the figure of the woman. Furthermore, the paper not only aims at analyzing what Butler would call a "shared sense of vulnerability" (99), but at drawing a link between the texts of Naylor and Walker regarding the historical issue of discrimination focusing on race, gender, and class; eventually showing how the discourses and statements found in the texts are applicable to the 21<sup>st</sup> society we live in. Regarding the state of the art, both *The Color Purple* and *The Women of Brewster Place* have been thoroughly analyzed due to their importance in African-American contemporary literature. The works have been studied from the perspectives of motherhood, female agency, abuse, or race and sexuality; nevertheless, this essay studies the aforementioned issues incorporating notions such as vulnerability and the Other which have gained prominence in recent years, especially after the events of 9/11 and its aftermath, in particular the series of wars that still are the cover of many magazines and papers around the world.

Following this introduction, a background to the texts in question and the issues the paper is going to analyze is provided. Then, Chapter 2 will deal with the question of female vulnerability more in depth by analyzing the issue of female vulnerability from the perspective of the Other and the ideas proposed by Emmanuel Lévinas and Judith Butler. Moreover, the paper will make use of bell hook and Walker's ideas to start analyzing the primary texts. Chapter 3, will first analyze *The Color Purple* (1982), by Walker, regarding sexuality, race, gender, and class and how they are depicted in the text; secondly, it will analyze *The Woman of Brewster Place* (1982), by Naylor, regarding similar topics as in Walker's novel. Finally, in Chapter 4, I will provide the conclusions of the overall analysis carried out.

The title of the paper makes reference to American singer-songwriter Neko Case's (1970–) career spanning vinyl box set *Truckdriver Gladiator Mule*. The artist has publicly spoken up on issues such as feminism and equality. Although the title may have a completely different meaning, my use of it is intended to show the multiple condition of the female figure; that is: first, unfortunately, a mule, in the sense that women have historically carried the burden of the household and everything it entails. In addition, regarded as inferior and having, thus, to carry the burden of oppression. Then, gladiators regarding the fact that they have had to fight against many odds to gain the privileges and rights of men. Finally, truckdrivers in the sense that they, too, can be drivers, leaders, they

can and should be the leaders, helping the world move—like a truck through highways, progress, and improve. In addition, truckdrivers who have a community in which they respect, support, and cherish each other. It is important to point out that a reference to mules can be found in Walker's *The Color Purple* when the protagonist's stepson, Harpo, asks for advice to the protagonist in order to control his wife, Sofia. Celie's interiorized discourse on women's inferiority makes her advise Harpo to beat her but the outcome of it is not as expected:

Next time us see Harpo his face a mess of bruises. His lip cut. One of his eyes shut like a fist. He walk stiff and say his teef ache. I say, What happen to you, Harpo? He say, Oh, me and that mule. She fractious, you know. She went crazy in the field the other day. By the time I got her to head for home I was all banged up. (36)

## **1.2. Background to *The Color Purple* (1982) and *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982)**

American novelist, short story writer, poet, and activist Alice Walker wrote *The Color Purple* in 1982 for which she won the National Book Award for hardcover fiction and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. The novel, which follows the epistolary format, was later adapted into a film and a musical of the same name starring Whoopi Goldberg, Danny Glover, Adolph Caesar, and Oprah Winfrey.<sup>1</sup> The story of the novel takes place in rural Georgia and focuses on the life of African-American women in Southern United States in the 30s. The novel addresses issues such as class, race, gender, and sexuality. Just as Naylor's work, Walker's is still a very relevant text, for it draws, too, criticism on these issues which still affect the 21<sup>st</sup> century society. Regarding Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, the American author's debut novel published in 1982 won the National Book Award in the category of First Novel. Years later, in 1989, the novel was adapted as a miniseries, and in 1990 as a television show with the name *Brewster Place* by Oprah Winfrey's Harpo Productions.<sup>2</sup> The novel comprises seven stories which are intertwined

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<sup>1</sup> *The Color Purple* is a 1985 film directed by Steven Spielberg. The film received positive reviews from critics. Roger Ebert awarded the film four stars and named it the best film of 1985. In his revised review of the film, Ebert says that "the movie may have inconsistencies, confusions, and improbabilities, but there is one perfect thing at its center, and that is the character of Celie" ("The Color Purple"). The film was nominated in ten categories of the Academy Awards and in five of the Golden Globe Awards. Whoopi Goldberg one a Golden Globe Award, the only award the film won overall.

<sup>2</sup> *The Women of Brewster Place* was a television miniseries broadcast on ABC directed by Donna Deitch and starring Oprah Winfrey. Due to the good reception of the miniseries, it was followed by a weekly series entitled *Brewster Place* which aired on ABC and was directed by Ivan Dixon, Jan Eliasberg, Bill Duke, and Helaine Head. *Entertainment Weekly* gave the series a grade B-, stating that "[there is] something complacent and artificial" in the series and that "the scripts have been lightweight. ("Television reviews for



and explore the lives of women in an urban setting and their relationship, both friendship and romantic. The novel explores issues of gender, race, and sexuality and ultimately draws criticism to women's oppression in the American society of the 80s.

I would like to attempt to propose layers of vulnerability based on the potentiality of discrimination regarding certain aspects. Taking into account the importance society places on gender and the binary terminology that has historically been imposed upon us, I believe that the first layer an individual has to face to avoid the first layer of vulnerability is gender. In *Feminism for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, published in 2014, American author, feminist, and social activist Gloria Jean Watkins (1952–), better known by her pen name bell hooks, opens the first chapter—"Feminist Politics: Where We Stand"—claiming that "feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression," the definition, hooks explains, "[does not] imply that men [are] the enemy" and "by naming sexism as the problem it [goes] directly to the heart of the matter . . . imply[ing] that all sexist thinking and action is the problem, whether those who perpetuate it are female or male, child or adult." hooks claims that "to understand feminism it implies one has to necessarily understand sexism" (1). From the early years of history, women did not have the same rights and privileges as men and were regarded as property and seen as opposed to what the men they were surrounded by were not. It was believed that a woman's place was found in the home; thus, raising children and dealing with the domestic chores. In the United States, in 1769, the colonies adopted the English system regarding women being unable to own property or own their earnings. Years later, in 1777, all states passed laws which took away women's right to vote. The first women's rights movement appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which grew out of the anti-slavery moment, and the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 70s. Women achieving full civil rights in the country was the result and—still is—of union between women, women supporting one another and working together for a common end. In the novels, we will see how women embody roles that protect one another; thus, becoming mothers and daughters, or sisters, for instance This can be explained partly because of the "shared sense of vulnerability" triggering activism and resistance against oppression which is still present nowadays (Butler 99). Secondly, a second layer of vulnerability would be race and class. Racism has been widespread in the United States since the colonial era, giving privileges

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week of May 11, 1990"). The show was cancelled after a month since it failed to be on a level with the miniseries.

and rights to white Americans while denying them to Native Americans, or African Americans, among others. Slavery in America began in the early 1600s and extended through the years and states. Slaves were mostly from Africa and worked in the production of tobacco crops and later in that of cotton, becoming the foundation of America's economy. Slavery, then, is found at the core of American history and the issues of racism and class are still found in contemporary America.

Now let us mix up all these 'traits;' that is, gender, race and class, and sexuality. The result would be, arguably, one of the 'ultimate vulnerable figures' as it were: an African-American woman, oppressed because of her gender—inside and outside the domestic sphere by men and other women, black—thus vulnerable outside her home in a society where she is regarded inferior, and in some instances in the texts, oppressed because of her sexual orientation. In order to illustrate the aforementioned, let us, then, look at the stories and characters found in Walker and Naylor's texts, their condition, struggles, resistance, and eventual rising. Let us meet the truckdriver gladiator mules.

## 2. THEORETICAL SECTIONS

### 2.1. The Other

The notion of the Other—also known as the Constitutive Other—has been widely studied in the fields of philosophy, psychology, ethics and critical theory among others. As professor Sundar Sarukkai explains in his overview of the Other, “The ‘Other’ in Anthropology and Philosophy,” anthropology was interested in the process of invention regarding the figure of the Other so as to develop a theory of humankind (1406). Perhaps, what first comes to mind when pondering on the notion of the Constitutive Other is its importance in post-colonial studies regarding imperialism and colonialism. Sarukkai explains that “modern anthropology arose when it began to contrast and alienate the cultures which were different from the west” (Sarukkai 1406). The European imperial system of colonies was based on the subordination of the native communities and their eventual domination. From the imperial conquest, there emerged the binary distinctions between the West and the East and the cultural inferiority of the ‘non-white’ people and their cultures. The anthropological Other, then, is based on the differences that can be perceived; in other words, it is an epistemological process. Nonetheless, one of the founders of the academic field of postcolonial studies, Edward W. Said’s (1935–2003) repeatedly pointed out the negative effects of this epistemology, particularly in his book *Orientalism*, a text about the representations of the East published in 1978. These ideas, as Sarukkai explains, have influenced the conception of other communities and have played an important role in “the construction of the savage other, primarily oriented towards the Africans and which subsequently encompassed even the Indian people” (1406). This conception is the basis of racism, which has historically been—and still is in many countries where ‘whites’ and ‘colored’ people cohabit—a problem which will be explored later on in the paper when analyzing the issue of race in the works by Naylor and Walker in Chapter 2. In the fields of philosophy, psychology, ethics, or critical theory, however, the notion of Other has been the basis to explain other concepts such as the Self which, according to German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), is required for defining the Self; philosopher Edmund Husserl’s (1859–1938) concept of intersubjectivity; or the ideas of French philosopher Jean-Paul Satre (1905–1980). Later on, in the fields of psychology and ethics, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) and ethical philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas (1906–1995) explored the notion from the contemporaneity of our times, understanding the Other as the counterpart of the Self. Lévinas re-formulated his ideas to include such propositions as those of French

philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004). For this paper, the interest of the concept of the Other lies on the exploration and understanding of the double nature of the notion of Other and how this influences the female and male characters in the texts. That is, on the one hand, the Levinasian “responsibility” towards the Other (84), and also the “shared sense of vulnerability” of the female characters to support and help each other in their struggle (Butler 99); on the other, the Other as threat which in the novels is depicted by the oppression of the males towards the female characters. The latter, again, will be explored in Chapter 2 together with the notion of female vulnerability. Both depictions—male and female—in the novels by Walker and Naylor, offer the reader a glimpse of the authors’ subjective descriptions of the world and its communities, while exposing the dynamics regarding the construction of Otherness. As professor Sarukkai points out, “fiction [is] a valid tool in anthropology [and it] stands as the exemplar of subjective construction of the world” and concludes that other social sciences should learn from literature as well (1409).

### **2.1.1. The Lévinasian Other**

One of the understandings surrounding the notion of the Other is Emmanuel Lévinas’s exploration of the Other, dealing with ethics understood as “orienting the subject towards acknowledging and responding to the ‘ethical’” (Sarukkai 1407). In “Ethics as First Philosophy,” Lévinas argues that morality lies in the Other and introduces the notion of “the face” of the Other, a face which presents itself “naked,” “defenseless,” and “vulnerable” (83). The Other becomes the center of ethics, replacing the emphasis on Being (the Self) with an ethics based in the experience of being open to the Other. He goes on arguing that the face of the Other “summons me, calls for me, begs for me, as if the invisible death that must be faced by the Other, pure otherness, separated, in some way, from any whole, were my business” (83). The effect the face of the Other produces is the calling, begging for “[one’s] responsibility” while “call[ing] one into question” (83). The face triggers one’s moral responsibility, one’s devotion for the other person “a responsibility for my neighbor, for the other man, for the stranger or sojourner, to which nothing in the rigorously ontological order binds me—nothing in the order of the thing, of the something, of number or causality” (84). Lévinas argues that the face of the Other makes one unique and the chosen one for the task of recognizing the other person. The French philosopher argues that “this responsibility . . . is the excellence of ethical proximity” (85). Sarukkai reads Lévinas’s question of responsibility towards the Other as

the “ethical responsibility not to violate the other by reducing it to one’s own system of thought,” in order to avoid the violence that comes from “the refiguration of the constitution of the native self” when not “heeding the ethical call of the other, the ethical call which demands responsibility of the observing self towards the native other” (1406-7). Lévinas proposed a kind of ethics not based on the hegemony of the subject but one based on the response to the other (Sarukkai 1407). In *The Color Purple* and *The Women of Brewster Place*, the female characters’ responsibility towards the other female characters seems to be the only instance of such Lévinasian sense of responsibility of his ethics. The female characters of the texts establish communities, support and cherish each other while the male characters are depicted as oppressors, abusers and blind in front of the “naked face” (Lévinas 83). Contrarily, the male characters of the novels regard the female ones as the post-colonial Other; that is, as inferior because of their gender. In the domestic sphere, there are instances of discrimination because of sexuality as well. Furthermore, one can also find instances of discrimination and construction of Otherness in the public sphere regarding race and class as we will see later in Chapter 2.

### **2.1.2. Butler: Precariousness, Vulnerability, and Ethics**

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler (1956–) makes use of Lévinas’s notion of the “face” to explain how it is that one is addressed by others and the inability to refuse the demand (131). Butler claims that the demands the Other makes is uncertain and quotes Lévinas when he argues that “the face is the other who asks me not to let him die alone . . . my ethical relation of love for the other stems from the fact that the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world” and that the face of the Other conveys the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’”(qtd. in Butler 131-2). Butler goes on reading Lévinas and quotes him when he argues that “the face of the other in its precariousness and defenselessness, is for me at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace” (qtd. in Butler 134). As one can see, the face of the Other, not only calls upon the Self for “peace” (recognition, humanization in the novels by the female characters) but also for “killing” (discrimination, oppression in the novels by the male characters). This could be explained by the survival of patriarchy and the supremacy on men over women, the white supremacy on ‘non-white’ communities, or the dominance of heteronormativities on non-heterosexual individuals. In this vein, Butler writes:

When we consider the ordinary ways that we think about humanization and dehumanization, we find the assumption that those who gain representation, especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanized, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all. (141)

At this point, Butler explores the issues of (de)humanization, and defacement as a consequence of war drawing attention to the media and their contribution to (de)humanization, illustrating it with CNN, Fox News or the *New York Times*, and concluding that “we have been turned away from the face, sometimes through the very image of the face” (150). Regarding *The Color Purple* and *The Women of Brewster Place*, one can find instances of the representation, or lack of it, which Butler writes about. In the texts, some of the female characters are treated, certainly, as “less than human,” or cannot represent themselves because of the oppression to which they are subjected; thus, they are not as humanized as their male counterparts (141). In the same vein, the African-American or African-American LGBT communities are not equally represented, thus creating ghettos such as Brewster Place, or entailing consequences such as the ones suffered by Lorraine in “The Two”: alienation and death.

In Judith Butler’s essay “Bodily Vulnerability, Coalitions, and Street Politics,” as the title declares, the theorist explores the matters of street politics, and reflects on the ways in which bodies come to perform resistance through vulnerability and argues how vulnerability can be used beyond the physical and psychological harm (99). Butler regards vulnerability “as a form of activism, or as that which is in some sense mobilized in forms of resistance” (99). In the novels by Naylor and Walker, coalitions between the female characters are made based on a “shared sense of vulnerability”; nonetheless, Butler argues that these alliances are not necessarily restricted to vulnerability (99). In the case of the female characters of the texts in question, the female characters’ circumstances make them more vulnerable than their male equivalents: “under certain regimes of power, some groups are targeted more readily than others, some suffer poverty more than others, some are exposed to police violence more than others” (109). Indeed, many women in the texts of Walker and Naylor live under the male’s yoke and oppression because of the social circumstances they live in, circumstances that only see them in relation to their husbands, merely wives, mothers, caretakers. Outside of the domestic sphere, their skin color exposes them—together with the men now—to discrimination and precariousness. What is clear is that women have suffered and still suffer “social

vulnerability disproportionately” (109). Nonetheless, as Butler claims, “the category of women is intersected by class, race, age, and a number of other vectors of power and sites of potential discrimination and injury” (109). Firstly, the female characters of the novels are silenced by layers of vulnerability. The first layer they are imposed is gender which has historically entailed a set of vulnerabilities and ill-treatments by the representatives of the patriarchal society they have to survive in; secondly, another layer of vulnerability would be race and class. This can be clearly seen outside the private sphere, and in this case the female characters unite with the male characters. Nevertheless, the “interdependency” Butler talks about does not indicate a “beautiful state of co-existence” and “it is not the same as social harmony” (116). Butler goes on to quote scholar and social activist Bernice Johnson Reagon (1942–) for this matter:

I feel as if I’m gonna keel over any minute and die. That is often what it feels like if you’re really doing coalition work. Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don’t, you’re not really doing no coalescing... You don’t go into coalition because you just like it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that’s the only way you can figure you can stay alive... (qtd. in Butler 116)

Thirdly, in the story “The Two” from *The Women of Brewster Place*, layers such as sexuality, which is the case of the characters of Theresa and Lorraine, aggravate the oppression suffered and make the female figure even more vulnerable. It is important to point out that it is very difficult to determine which collective is exposed to greater vulnerability. For some, working-class African-American women would be considered less vulnerable than other individuals. Indeed, as Butler argues, “the very debate about who belongs to the group called ‘women’ marks a distinct zone of vulnerability, namely, those who are non-gender conforming, and whose exposure to discrimination, harassment, and violence is clearly heightened on those grounds” (110) and here one should include, religion, nationality or disability, among other aspects. For Butler, vulnerability or the lack of it “are not essential features of men or women, but, rather, processes of gender formation, the effects of modes of power that have as one of their aims the production of gender differences along lines of inequality” (112). This would explain, for instance, and as Butler illustrates, the fact that men regard the feminist movement as a threat, or that the general public criticize sexual and gender minorities, saying that they are imposing and oppressing it (112). Butler concludes claiming that the body is exposed for what it embodies and to things one cannot foresee or have control

over (114). Furthermore, Butler argues that vulnerability is closely linked to being open to the world and the need to abide to society's rules and consequences.

## 2.2. Female Vulnerability

The notion of the Other has also been used to describe the male-dominant culture. In *The Second Sex* (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986), one can find what Butler calls “a shared sense of vulnerability” (“Bodily Vulnerability” 99). In the text, French existentialist Simone de Beauvoir discusses the treatment towards women through history. Beauvoir takes the master-slave dialectic to the gender aspect, describing, thus, a male-dominated culture where women embody the (sexual) Other seen in relation to men. Beauvoir's philosophical text—which is often regarded as a major work and a turning point in feminism and starting point of second-wave feminism—opens with:

Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers: She is a womb, an ovary; she is a female: this word is enough to define her. From a man's mouth, the epithet ‘female’ sounds like an insult; but he, not ashamed of his animality, is proud to hear: ‘He's a male!’ The term ‘female’ is pejorative not because it roots woman in nature but because it confines her in her sex, and if this sex, even in an innocent animal, seems despicable and an enemy to man, it is obviously because of the disquieting hostility woman triggers in him. (41)

It is important to point out two terms from the above quotation. The first one being the fact that women are regarded as being merely ‘wombs’ as if that were their only function in the world. This image relates to the idea of the female figure as Margaret Atwood portrays it in her 1985 dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*; that is, women subjugated to a patriarchal society where their only role to play is that of being ovaries/wombs. The second term worth mentioning is the threat the female figure represents, and which makes men hostile towards them; namely a threat to the patriarchal society, and men's supremacist role in it. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that what “[s]ingularly defines the situation of woman is that being, like all humans, an autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other” (37). For Beauvoir, humanity is male, and women are defined not as individual beings but in relation to the male figure, by everything they lack (11). While the man “represents both the positive and the neuter”—as can be seen in the word ‘mankind’ for instance—“women is the negative, to such a point that any determination is imputed to her as a limitation, without reciprocity” (25). In brief, as Beauvoir argues, one is *not born* a woman, but *becomes* a woman (18; emphasis added). In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler



regards gender as performative, and as a social construct. Butler argues that “women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity” (7) and that “it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (6). While the agency of women is restricted to the female’s body and its sex, the male body “becomes . . . the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom,” a freedom women lack (16). Butler goes on exploring the idea of gender as a social construct, referencing Foucault among other scholars, and she references Beauvoir when arguing that the philosopher “proposes that the female body ought to be the situation and instrumentality of women’s freedom, not a defining and limiting essence” (17). In other words, this construction of the female gender—thus the female identity in relation to everything male identity is not—makes women embody the figure of the Other and everything it entails: oppression, discrimination, subjugation, and vulnerability. But what is female vulnerability? Let us first understand what vulnerability is. Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds answer the question in *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, by defining it as a condition of human life:

By virtue of our embodiment, human beings have bodily and material needs; are exposed to physical illness, injury, disability, and death; and depend on the care of others for extended periods during our lives. As social and affective beings we are emotionally and psychologically vulnerable to others in myriad ways: to loss and grief; to neglect, abuse, and lack of care; to rejection, ostracism, and humiliation. As sociopolitical beings, we are vulnerable to exploitation, manipulation, oppression, political violence, and right abuses. And we are vulnerable to the natural environment and to the impact on the environment of our own, individual and collective, actions, and technologies. (1)

Butler argues that some populations are more vulnerable and precarious than others, and as will be seen in the works by Naylor and Walker, the women of *The Color Purple* and *The Women of Brewster Place* are disproportionately more vulnerable than the men. Indeed, women—as the Latin word *vulnus* implies, ‘wound’—are more easily wounded, “[more] susceptible to wounding and to suffering” (4). Rather than ontological, then, vulnerability—in this case—should be understood as springing from the social, historical, and political circumstances so as to make women more vulnerable as a response to the threat they present to other groups; that is, African-American men in the domestic sphere, and white supremacy in the public sphere. Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds use the term “situational,” when talking about the aforementioned source of vulnerability, in other

words, “context specific” (7). They also mention the terms “short term,” “intermittent,” and “enduring.” As one can see, with the recent women’s marches across the US and the world, and other issues regarding equality, women’s vulnerability should be considered according to Mackenzie et al.’s terminology—unfortunately—an “enduring” condition. In the previously provided definition by Mackenzie et al., it is important to highlight the terms “death,” “abuse,” “rejection,” “oppression,” or “right abuses.” As one can notice, these terms can be easily applied to the female condition. Of course, as one will see in Chapter 2, many female characters in the novels have to suffer (sexual) abuse, maltreatment, refusal, and even death. Once more, it is important to mention what Butler argues in her paper “Bodily Vulnerability, Coalitions, and Street Politics,” that this “shared sense of vulnerability”—although it is not the only cause for coalition—prompts the vulnerable figures, in this case, the female figures, to “perform resistance through vulnerability” by bonding together, as one will see in many instances in the novels, against a common enemy (99).

### **2.2.1. The Womanist: Vulnerability in the African-American Female Figure**

At this point one has an idea of the notion of the Other and female vulnerability. However, the texts by Walker and Naylor depict women who find themselves, as Butler argues, “intersected by class, race, and gender” which are certainly “of potential discrimination and injury” (“Bodily Vulnerability” 109). Indeed, in *The Color Purple* and *The Women of Brewster Place*, all the female characters are African-American women suffering the aforementioned discrimination. In *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*, published in 1983, a collection by Alice Walker composed of 36 different essays, articles, and speeches, among other texts, Walker provides a definition for the term ‘womanist’; that is, “a black feminist or feminist of color . . . a woman who loves other women . . . Appreciates and prefers . . . women’s strength . . . [and a woman who is] committed to survival and wholeness of entire people . . . [who] loves herself” (xi–xii). A womanist woman, then, is a woman of color, who loves, respects, and admires women’s strength and is committed to her community and to herself. Indeed, as one will see, many female characters in the texts could be defined in these terms. Regarding the issue of vulnerability in relation to the African-American female figure, Walker opens her collection of essays *Living by the Word: Essays* with a story entitled “Am I Blue?” The story is about a horse she once met called Blue. Blue seemed to live happily in the neighboring house and Walker fed him apples from time to time. One day, however,

Walker read through him, and saw the sadness the animal was carrying around. Walker reflects on black slavery and parallels the living conditions of Blue with that of the African-American slaves during the enslavement years in the US. Walker reproduces what a white woman of the time would have said: “I can’t understand these Negroes, these blacks. What do they want? They’re so different from us” (17). Precisely, what African-American slaves wanted was freedom, just like Blue. Then, Walker narrates how one morning she saw another horse with Blue, and the two horses were joyfully galloping together. One day, after a visit to the city, Walker went out to give Blue some apples. She noticed how the other horse had gone. Apparently, Blue’s friend, was, in fact, a breeding mare and Blue would not see her again. Walker, now, reflects on this and declares: “If I had been born into slavery, and my partner had been sold or killed, my eyes would have looked like that” (19). From that moment on, Blue was not the same:

[In] Blue’s large brown eyes was a new look, more painful than the look of despair: the look of disgust with human beings, with life; the look of hatred. And it was odd what the look of hatred did. It gave him, for the first time, the look a beast. And what that meant was that he had put up a barrier within to protect himself from further violence; all the apples in the world wouldn’t change that fact. (21)

As one can see, this could also be extrapolated to the (female) African-American experience, namely being born in oppression and subjugated to the power of others. Just as Blue, many female characters of the analyzed works by Naylor and Walker also create a barrier to protect themselves from others—Brewster Place itself for instance—to prevent more violence against them. In *In Search*, Walker writes about the poet Jean Toomer visiting the South in the early twenties and discovering “a curious thing: black women whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so unconscious, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held” (232). Some of them, as Walker claims, were Walker’s mother and grandmother, women “trapped in an evil honey, toiling away their lives in an era, a century, that did not acknowledge them, except as ‘the mule of the world’” (232). Walker reads Toomer when saying that “he saw them enter loveless marriages, without joy; and become prostitutes, without resistance; and become mothers of children, without fulfillment” (233). As one can see, women’s “situational” vulnerability—to use Mackenzie et al.’s terminology—made possible the aforementioned realities (Mackenzie et al. 7). Moreover, in *In Search*, Walker reflects on the unexploited creativity of black women, since for many years black people in America have been punished for reading or writing, women “who might have been Poets, Novelists,

Essayists, and Short-Story Writers (over a period of centuries), who died with their real gifts stifled within them” (234). She writes:

Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one’s status in society, ‘the *mule* of the world,’ because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else—*everyone* else—refused to carry . . . When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; then we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest corner. When we have asked for love, we have been given children. In short, even our plainer gifts, our labors of fidelity and love, have been knocked down our throats. To be an artist and a black woman, even today, lowers our status in many respects, rather than raises it: and yet, artists we will be. (237; emphasis in original)

The main difference between female vulnerability and Africa-American female vulnerability, then, is that African-American women found themselves intersected also by race and class, thus, entailing higher oppression and lack of equal opportunities—as Walker writes—than their white counterparts. In the public sphere, as bell hooks (1952–) writes in *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, “[a]ll white women in [America] know that their status is different from that of black women/women of color . . . [a]ll white women in this nation know that whiteness is a privileged category” (55). In other words, in America, after white male supremacy, one has to fight white female supremacy. bell hooks argues that the relationship between white and black women in America is still difficult due to the fact that the country is still racially segregated and that despite efforts to end the segregation, it is still a fact that different communities only socialize with people of their respective groups (59). hooks concludes that it still remains to be changed and that a “mass-based anti-racism feminist movement” is, indeed, plausible (60). In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks opens the book with these words: “It is only in the act and practice of loving blackness that we are able to reach out and embrace the world without destructive bitterness and ongoing collective rage . . . [h]olding each other close across differences, beyond conflict, through change, is an act of resistance.” hooks references Stuart Hall when arguing that “not only . . . were we [African-Americans] constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as ‘Other’” (3; emphasis in original). In the domestic sphere, sexism would be one of the causes, as bell hooks points out when arguing that “all sexist thinking and action is the problem, whether those who perpetuate is are female of male, child or

adult” (*Feminism* 1). Although sexism is certainly found in both spheres, one will see the importance of sexism as the source of domestic violence and oppression in the novels by Walker and Naylor.

### 3. ANALYSIS OF THE WORKS

#### 3.1. *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker

You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself. I don't say nothing. I think bout Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive.  
— Shug to Celie in *The Color Purple*

In 1982, Alice Walker published *The Color Purple*, an epistolary novel winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award in 1983. The novel tells the story of African-American women in the Southern United States in the 1930s. The story focuses on Celie, a teenage girl, who is raped by her father and later by her husband. Celie takes on a journey of self-discovery as a woman and sexual being in rural Georgia where her community is not only racist, but heteronormative and sexist. Celie's journey starts when she meets Shug Avery, a blues singer, a woman who makes Celie aware of a reality unknown to her: a lifestyle outside traditional and hegemonic expectations. The text might be difficult for several reasons. The first difficulty the reader may find has to do with the fact that the text is not written in the style most novels are written in. Walker's novel is an epistolary novel, so the reader encounters a series of letters written by the heroine of the story—Celie—or by her sister—Nettie. Furthermore, the letters that comprise the novel are not dated so the reader has to carry out an exercise of ordering the events, by looking for clues, social attitudes, and other details so as to form a chronology of the story. The reader, then, relies on their close reading of the text and on the details the narrators give them. In addition to this aforementioned singularity, the language Celie uses to narrate the story is non-standard, a fact that the reader has to become familiar with. This is due to the fact that Celie is an uneducated woman and writes exactly the way she thinks. It is important to point out that the text is made of intimate letters of, first, a teenager, and, later, a woman who addresses God in order to confide her day-to-day life experience of suffering, abuse, and discrimination. It is also worth noticing that Celie does not sign her letters for a long time which could be explained by the fact that, as one will see in the following analysis of the novel, the heroine is incapable to regard herself as a distinct subject, as a person sufficiently worthy to sign her name in the letters. Indeed, Celie lacks confidence and feels unloved: “Nobody ever love me, I say” (112). It is by means of her address to God, too, that she tries to feel valuable, to find meaning in her existence. This, however, is not achieved until the end of the novel when the reader sees how Celie has gained the self-esteem she lacked. This is the moment when she starts

signing her name, when she becomes a powerful and mature woman who has had to face the many odds that were against her. Moreover, the rest of the female characters of the novel play an important role too, and as one will see, some of them foreshadow what Celie could—and finally does—become: an independent woman. In *The Color Purple*, Walker addresses issues such as race, sexism, sexuality, feminism, and class, and presents a character who overcomes the difficulties and challenges she has been obliged to suffer. *The Color Purple* is a feminist manifesto, in favor of sexual liberation, female agency, and a calling for an inclusive and heterogeneous community.

### 3.1.1. “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”: Male Abuse in *The Color Purple*

During one of the performances of Shug Avery at Harpo’s juke joint, where “Mr. \_\_\_ [Celie’s husband] didn’t want [her] to come” because “wives don’t go to places like that” but where Celie goes because Shug says so, Mr. \_\_\_ and Celie sit down at the same table and while Mr. \_\_\_ drinks whiskey and Celie has a cold drink, Shug does the following (72):

First Shug sing a song by somebody name Bessie Smith. She say Bessie somebody she know. Old friend. It call A Good Man Is Hard to Find.<sup>3</sup> She look over at Mr. \_\_\_ a little when she sing that. I look over at him too. For such a little man, he all puff up. (72; emphasis added)

One could interpret Shug’s choice of the song and her look at Mr. \_\_\_ as a challenge towards the patriarchal power he exercises on Celie. In addition, the choice of the song foreshadows the abuse and gender discrimination in the novel. These aspects play a very important role in the novel as one will see. It is important to point out, however, that abuse is closely linked to the female condition, since the female characters of the novel are the ones who suffer the abuse of their male counterparts the most. In this vein, this section will focus on the different kinds of male abuse the novel depicts by analyzing the male characters of the novel in order to understand what makes them exercise such violence on their female counterparts. As Candice Marie Jenkins points out, the male characters of the novel make statements on their capacity to rule in the private sphere (982). Indeed, it can be better seen in the private sphere but also in the public one.

To begin with, one of the characters who suffers oppression and maltreatment the most in the novel is the heroine, Celie. Celie claims that “[she has] always been a good

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<sup>3</sup> The version of the song by Bessie Smith reads: “So if your man is nice, take my advice / Hug him in the morning, kiss him at night / Give him plenty love madam, treat your man right / Cause a good man nowadays sure is hard to find.”

girl” and talks about Fonso—her father, who, later in the novel, the reader, together with Celie discovers, that he is, in fact, her stepfather—about how “he never had a kine word to say to [her]” (1). A few letters later, Celie writes: “When I start to hurt and then my stomach start moving and then that little baby come out my pussy chewing on it first you could have knock me over with a feather” (2). From the very beginning of the novel, the reader meets a father who rapes her daughter and treats her like she is useless. Celie knows that the way to get away from her situation is by empowering herself and fighting back. That is why, Nettie and herself study hard: “Us both be hitting Nettie’s school-books pretty hard, cause us know we got to be smart to git away” (9). Yet, Celie is constantly undervalued, constantly repeated the same discourse: “You too dumb to keep going to school, Pa say. Nettie the clever one in this bunch” (9). It is important to point out, that this discourse was popular at the time when the novel takes place and has historically been addressed to women—and unfortunately it still is in many parts of the world. A discourse similar to what Albert—Mr. \_\_—says to Celie when she asks for Nettie’s letters he has been keeping from her: “Who you think you is? he say. You can’t curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, *you a woman*. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all” (206; emphasis added). As a response to Celie and Nettie’s comment, Nettie answers that Celie is smart as well and that their professor Miss Beasley says that too. Nonetheless, Celie writes: “Pa, say, Whoever listen to any Addie Beasley have to say. She run off at the mouth so much no man would have her” (10). As one can see, Fonso is embodying at this moment the figure of the man who rejects women who do not follow the expected behavior of their society and do not play by the rules. In this way, Fonso silences what Miss Beasley has to say—who probably is an educated and well-read woman. In the end, Celie feels like having “nothing to offer” and believing that her place—as she has been repeatedly told—is “to be at home” yet being aware of the fact that men are a threat to her gender: “Most times mens look pretty much alike to me” (14; 82; 15). It worth noticing that conducts such as those of Fonso, Albert, and Harpo—towards Sofia—together with the rest of the male characters that abuse women can be summarized with one quote: “Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr. \_\_ say, Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn” (22).

One may argue that the source of these conducts is to be found in the construction of masculinities which still today remain; that is, a hostile attitude toward women in order to reinforce the male’s authority in the system, and a way to protect themselves from the threat that women—embodying the notion of the Other—pose to their supremacy. It is



also worth noticing that Mr.\_\_\_\_ hides Nettie's letters in a trunk full of "Shug's underclothes, some nasty picture postcards, and . . . tobacco" (124). One can see the symbolism of male supremacy behind the image; that is, 'male' objects hiding and oppressing letters from Nettie which serve as an escape for Celie, a feeling of hope and love from her sister.

As one can see, male abuse is key to the novel. By abusing the female characters of the novel, the male characters of the text reinforce their gender role and their authority in their society, cancelling the peril women may constitute. Indeed, the men of *The Color Purple* "seem determined to make the women under them pay for the wrongs of society by enforcing strict gender divisions, often through violence" (Mary Donnelly 89). Nonetheless, as one will see in the following sections, it is this precise abuse and oppression that makes the women characters come together, help each other, and fight back. And at the end of the novel, too, the male characters lose their power and Walker seems to point out at a change of mind on their behalf regarding their conception of what 'woman' means. As Jenkins argues regarding Mr.\_\_\_\_ engaging with Celie, "I read his participation in this traditionally 'female' activity as an indication, perhaps the most striking, that his character has divested from the patriarchal behaviors which marked him as a tyrant in earlier portions of the novel" (985).

### 3.1.2. "That Mule": The Female Condition in *The Color Purple*

The title of this section makes reference to a conversation between Harpo and Celie in which Harpo has followed Celie's advice in order to make Sofia more submissive. Previously, Celie advised him to "beat her" but the outcome of this is far from what Harpo expected (36):

Next time us see Harpo his face a mess of bruises. His lip cut. One of his eyes shut like a fist. He walk stiff and say his teef ache. I say, What happen to you, Harpo? He say, Oh, me and that mule. She fractious, you know, she went crazy in the field the other day. By time I got her to head for home I was all banged up. Then when I got home, I walked smack dab into the crib door. Hit my eye and scratch my chin. Then when that storm come up last night I shet the window down on my hand.  
(36)

The attempt, then, has not been successful, but what might be more interesting, though, is the fact that Celie adopts the role of the abuser and adjures Harpo to beat his wife, to oppress her even more in order to take full control of her. In the text, the female condition

is deeply explored, especially through Celie's experience as a teenage girl who has only known abuse and oppression from her male counterparts, and who lives in a society where she is regarded as inferior because she is a lower-class Africa-American woman. As Donnelly points out, Walker—who has been concerned with the representation of black women throughout her career—"seek[s] to give voice to the voiceless, to those who suffer the double oppression of race and gender" (88).

In the beginning of the novel, Celie tells her sister that she "[does not] know how to fight," and she says: "all I know how to do is stay alive" (17). Little by little, Celie will become a powerful woman; however, from the very beginning of the novel she has to fight many odds. Celie writes: "I got breasts full of milk running down myself" (3). As one can see, Celie first has to endure the consequence of being raped; that is, a pregnancy. Celie is merely a teenage girl when she has to face gestation and everything that it entails. Secondly, Celie has to face being forced to get married with a man she does not love nor know. Celie—and many women in the novel—play the role of replacement. Women replace other women in the novel in order to take care of other women's offspring: "Mr. \_\_ say, Well, you know, my poor little ones sure could use a mother" (7). In the novel, women are treated as objects, maids in the service of men: "When a woman marry she spose to keep a decent house and a clean family" (19). Walker, indeed, emphasizes sexism, and the intensity of the discourse can be seen through the words of Harpo when he is a little boy: "Harpo, don't let Celie be the one bring in all the water, You a big boy now. Time for you to help out some. Women work, he say. What? She say. Women work. I'm a man" (21). The situation affects Celie tremendously: "Mr. \_\_ marry me to take care of his children. I marry him cause my daddy made me. I don't love Mr. \_\_ and he don't love me" (63).

As a consequence, sisterhood is very much emphasized in the novel with many dynamics established between the female characters.<sup>4</sup> The most important is the relationship between Nettie and Celie, a relationship based on love and what Judith Butler would call a "shared sense of vulnerability" ("Bodily Vulnerability" 99). It is also important to mention the resistance of the female characters of the novel. To begin with, Celie fights back when she explains to Shug the continuous beatings she has to suffer

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the 'bonding' and 'sisterly love' between the female characters of the text bring into mind Adrienne Cecile Rich's concept of the "lesbian continuum": "*lesbian continuum* to include a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of women-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman" (18).

when she is not present. In this way, Celie first fights back by telling Shug about the ill-treatment she is a subject of, a woman who may help her given the influence she has over Albert: “I won’t leave, she say, until I know Albert won’t even think about beating you” (75). At the end of the novel, however, when she discovers that Albert has been keeping letters from her, Celie can take no more. She revolts, and finally plucks up the courage to leave him, adopting—at last—the identity she lacked.

Another interesting character that revolts is Sofia—Harpo’s wife, who embodies an independent and outspoken woman. Celie writes about Sofia: “I’m jealous of you . . . cause you do what I can’t . . . fight” (40). Fighting is something Celie thinks she is not capable of doing but as the reader sees at the end of the novel, our heroine does. The character of Squeak—Harpo’s girlfriend—is also worth mentioning. Squeak, who after being raped leaves Harpo, begins to make a name for herself as a blues singer, becoming who she wants to be, with even a new name that fully describes her: “my name Mary Agnes, she say” (97).

As one can see, the female condition in the novel is thoroughly explored, and many of the female characters and their statements give the reader a glimpse of what must have felt to be a woman at that time—and even today. In brief, and as Sofia claims when she finally speaks up:

All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain’t safe in a family of men. But I never thought I’d have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I’ll kill him dead before I let him beat me. (40)

### 3.1.3. “Nobody Ever Love Me”: (Homo)Sexual Awakening in *The Color Purple*

The title of this section makes reference to a conversation between Celie and Shug, where Celie tells her that nobody has ever loved her, except Shug—and obviously Nettie, her sister. In *The Color Purple*, the oppression of the society the heroine lives in does not allow her to know herself as a woman nor as a sexual being. Celie writes when she was first raped: “It hurt me, you know, I say. I was just going on fourteen. I never even thought bout men having nothing down there so big. It scare me just to see it. And the way it poke itself and grow” (111). Celie’s first sexual experience involved non-consensual sex: first with her stepfather and then with her husband, as Donnelly claims “sexual intercourse in the novel tends to be presented as rape or abuse” (90). When first meeting Shug Avery, Celie writes: “I just be thankful to lay eyes on her” (25). Shug works as an escape from

Celie's reality and at the same time a figure that represents hope and love and who, as one will see, awakes Celie's (homo)sexuality in a society where not only she is rejected because of her gender in the domestic sphere and because of her gender and race and class in the public one, but expected to behave according to the heteronormativities she lives among.

From the very beginning of the encounter between the two, the reader can feel how Celie is awakening to her true self: "First time I got full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into a man" (49). Shug not only awakes Celie's true sexual orientation but serves as a way for Celie to enjoy her body and sex. Celie's experience with sex has not provided her any pleasure. Celie tells Shug that what she feels when she has sex with Albert is nothing, for Celie, Albert, "do[es] his business" to what Shug responds: "You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you" to which Celie agrees (77). Indeed, Celie feels like a sexual object, something Albert can use freely. Eventually, Shug and Celie make love and they move to Memphis. Shug tells Celie: "You not my maid. I didn't bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet" (211).

Indeed, Shug plays a very important role in the novel. Not only does she use her influence on Albert to make him stop abusing Celie, but she helps her finally fight back when they found out Nettie's letters. On the other hand, Shug awakes Celie's sexual aspect through loving and respecting her: "Shug say, Us each other's peoples now, and kiss me" (183). Indeed, female respect and love is key in the novel so as to resist male abuse. Indeed, as Donnelly suggests, "what Shug offers Celie, more than anything else, is knowledge of herself . . . [and] helps restore Celie to wholeness" (91). This marks, for many readers, the turning point in the text; that is, when Celie "asserts her freedom from her husband and proclaims her right to exist" (Daniel W. Ross 3)

#### **3.1.4. "They Calls Me Yellow, Like Yellow Be My Name": Race in *The Color Purple***

Music plays an important role in *The Color Purple* as one has seen with Shug Avery and her choice of song with "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" by Bessie Smith. In addition to Shug being a singer, the character of Mary Agnes—formerly Squeak, also pursues her dream of becoming a professional singer. Mary Agnes—who starts being a secondary character—gains power after she is raped, standing up to people and making others know her as Mary Agnes in order to construct her own identity and become whoever she wants to be. A verse of one of the songs Mary Agnes sings is what entitles this section on race:

“They calls me yellow / Like yellow be my name / They calls me yellow / Like yellow be my name / But if yellow is a name / Why ain’t black the same / Well, if I say Hey black girl / Lord, she try to ruin my game”<sup>5</sup> (99). In *The Color Purple*, the reader can find instances of racism and classism both inside the community and in the public sphere. This racism and classism affect many of the female characters of the novel.

Firstly, one can see the prejudices of the black characters in the novel influenced by the white discourses they are surrounded by. There are instances in the novel where the shade of black is problematized inside the community. When talking about Celie, Albert’s sisters, who come to judge Celie and her housekeeping, say: “She young and pretty . . . not so pretty, say Carrie, looking in the looking glass. Just that head of hair. She too black” (20). In addition, when Harpo tells Celie about her infatuation for Sofia, Celie writes: “She pretty, he tell me. Bright. Smart? Naw. Bright skin. She smart too though” (29). Without a question, the shade of black is very important inside the community, thus, Africa-American characters in the novel exercise racism upon themselves, again, because of the discourse of white men and women in the novel regarding the inferiority of the colored people and their condition as the Other. Secondly, the reader also finds instances of racism in the public sphere. The clearest example of racism is found in the event of the overpowered Sofia who is sentenced to twelve years in prison—after being beaten—merely for speaking her mind on not wanting to be a maid to a white woman: “When I see Sofia I don’t know why she still alive. They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side” (86).

Although racism—and social class—could be explored more thoroughly in the novel, one can see its importance in some instances in the novel—Sofia’s experience would serve as a clear example. As Donnelly points out, “the events surrounding Sofia’s imprisonment offer the clearest illustration of encounters with white society” (94). In addition, Walker explores race outside the United States through the eyes of Nettie since she travels to Africa as a missionary with Revered Samuel and Corinne—his wife—together with Celie’s children who they buy from Fonso. Nettie writes to Celie about colored people in Africa and debunk what once they held true:

All the Ethiopians in the bible were colored. It had never occurred to me, though when you read the bible it is perfectly plain if you pay attention only to the words. It is the pictures in the bible that fool you. The pictures that illustrate the words. (134)

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<sup>5</sup> The song may be interpreted as colors—race—having the power to determine how people behave toward one another.

### 3.2. *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) by Gloria Naylor

They were hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased, these women of Brewster Place. They came, they went, grew up, and grew old beyond their years. Like an ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story.

— “Dawn” from *Brewster Place*

Gloria Naylor published *The Women of Brewster Place* in 1982 and her literary debut won the National Book Award in 1983. In her acceptance speech Naylor said: “I wrote [this] book as a tribute to [my mother] and other black women who, in spite of the very limited personal circumstances, somehow manage to hold a fierce belief in the limitless possibilities of the human spirit” (“Gloria Naylor, Winner of the 1983 Fiction Award for *The Women of Brewster Place*”). As stated in the subtitle to the novel, *The Women* is, in fact, a novel made up of seven different—yet intertwined—stories. Stories of six different women with a lot of things in common who are now residents of the same community: Brewster Place. Located in an unnamed city, Brewster Place is a housing complex whose creation is linked to corruption involving the alderman of a sixth district and the managing director of Unico Realty Company who “agreed to erect four double-housing units on some worthless land in the badly crowded district” (1). Brewster Place survives the different circumstances and eventually becomes a place of residence to migrants. Many of these migrants came from the South of the United States due to the second Great Migration during the post-World War II period “in the hope of gaining economic advancement while escaping bigotry and violence” (Charles E. Wilson Jr. 55). Brewster Place, in the end, becomes a kind of ghetto, “a locus for the oppression of already oppressed people,” making emphasis on the oppression of the female characters of the text (Wilson Jr. 56). The novel, then, explores in depth the topic of class through the metaphor of Brewster Place and its wall which separates Brewster Place from the city, suggesting that the residents have been left there to die both physically and emotionally (Wilson Jr. 56). This study produces a feminist reading of the novel, thus, analyzing why the female characters in the novel are “excluded, exploited, suppressed, and oppressed” (Wilson Jr. 60). Indeed, it is precisely through the notions of the construction of otherness and the vulnerability of the female condition regarding the aforementioned issues that one can answer the novel’s feminist core and message. Certainly, as Wilson Jr. claims, the text “provides a perfect model for exploring some of the concepts of feminist theory and criticism” and goes on to say that “in every chapter, Naylor addresses women’s sexuality

and questions the role of this sexuality in defining the person/woman” (61). Furthermore, Charles E. Wilson, Jr. points out the fact that Naylor “suggests that every action in which [men] engage is, in some way, indicative of their need to expose their sexual energy”; thus, their power and supremacy, which can be seen in their general oppression towards women, an “effort to showcase [their] virility” (62). Moreover, he suggests that “Naylor confines all men to the role of sexual predator” (62). It is worth noticing that, whereas Walker provides a certain redemption for some of the male characters at the end of the story, Naylor seems not to. Indeed, it is the male predaciousness and phallocentrism that help establish the coalitions between the women of Brewster Place and, in some instances, also help develop their agency “together in an antagonistic stance against all men” (62). Let us analyze, then, the different women and their stories while “[they] call attention to the politics of race, gender, and sexuality in their transgressive behavior (Trimiko Melancon 162).

### **3.2.1. “Where’s Your Husband?”: Male Abuse, and Female Agency and Caring in *The Women of Brewster Place***

The novel opens with the story “Mattie Michael,” which is about a woman who is moving to Brewster Place on her own. From all the characters in the novel, Michael is the most prominent of all the female and male characters and appears in all of the novel’s seven stories. As Wilson Jr. argues in *Gloria Naylor: A Critical Companion*, “Mattie’s story also lays the foundation for some of the themes later developed in other chapters” (37). Most of Mattie’s story is narrated via flashback. Her story is about the “falli[ng] from grace” (Wilson Jr. 38) for she not only has to flee from her parent’s house after being repudiated and abused but loses a child and her home after fighting for them. However, Mattie never loses hope and serves as a source of support for other characters such as Etta Mae Johnson and Lucielia Louise Turner, embodying what Walker would call “womanist,” a woman of color, who loves and supports her community (*In Search* xi–xii).

From the very beginning of the novel, Naylor depicts male abuse as a response to the patriarchal society the female characters live in. In the case of Mattie Michael, the novel narrates how she is twenty years old and she is living with her parents in rural Tennessee when she was seduced by “a cinnamon-red man” called Butch Fuller who was a well-known womanizer (8). Soon, Mattie finds herself pregnant. Although Mattie tells her mother, she refuses to tell her father who the father of the child is for she fears how

her father might react: “But her father would kill her if he heard she had been seen walking with Butch Fuller” (10). But Mattie is not like other girls, at some point Butch tells her that she is “hardly ever at a loss for words” (16); thus, pointing out her unconventional and freethinking spirit. When her father demands being informed about the pregnancy, he:

Grabbed [Mattie] by the back of the hair, and yanked her face upward to confront the blanket of rage in his eyes . . . she took the force of the two blows with her neck muscles, and her eyes went dim as the blood dripped down her chin from her split lip. (22)

As one can see, Mattie is punished for having agency regarding who she wants to have sexual relations with and, when she cannot make peace with her father, she leaves home on her own having to take care of her unborn baby as opposed to Butch Fuller, who simply ignores and neglects Mattie and the baby. Indeed, the reaction of Mattie’s father could be read by taking into account one of the main themes of the novel; that is, parent-child relationships. At one point when Samuel Michael is not talking to her daughter because of the pregnancy, her mother tells Mattie not to worry, since “that man lives and breathes for you” (20). Charles Jr. argues that “when Sam Michael discovers that [his] daughter Mattie is pregnant, he is highly disappointed in part because he had cherished such high hopes for her and in part because he blames himself for having protected her so tightly” (53). Be that as it may, one has to judge Samuel Michael’s actions and question whether he would have reacted the same way if instead of a daughter it involved a son. Mattie’s decision to leave home on her own—thus proving her agency as an independent woman—results in many odds she has to face. When the child—Basil—is born, Mattie, being a single mother, is responsible for everything the child needs and she “struggles to work and care for [the baby]” (Charles Jr. 38). Mattie has to work many hours and has to live in precarious places with the baby. One day Basil is bitten by a rat and Mattie decides to leave her place and look for a better and decent one. She is told that “we don’t take children” and asked, “where’s your husband?” since “this is a respectable place” (Naylor 29–30). As one can see, Mattie’s female condition not only makes her the object of abuse, but that of discrimination given the fact that she is a single mother, thus regarded as indecent. Mattie’s salvation appears in the form of the godsend Miss Eva Turner. She provides Mattie and her son with a home. Miss Eva’s experience regarding her father is similar to that of Mattie, a father who “kept [her] locked in [her] room for weeks with the windows all nailed up” when she ran off with her first husband (34). Their “shared



vulnerability”; then, makes Mattie and Eva bond due to similar experiences “runn[ing] a fairly harmonious household” (“Bodily Vulnerability” 99; Wilson Jr. 39). Moreover, it is worth mentioning that while living with Miss Eva, Mattie is uninterested in men, perhaps because of the fact that he has been hurt by them. At the same time, however, Naylor might be calling attention to her independent spirit which, as opposed to what Miss Eva says, it is, indeed, natural: “it ain’t natural for a young woman like you to live that way” (37). The way Miss Eva mentions is, in fact, going to the choir, to the zoo with her son and Miss Eva’s granddaughter—Ciel—and to the movies. Mattie is, then, criticized for living her life the way she wants and not around a man, a male discourse that has clearly influenced Miss Eva. As one will see, and as Charles Jr. argues, Mattie is “developed more fully than all others [characters]” and “serve[s] the function of surrogate mother and spiritual guide” and “a vehicle for change in the other women” (47–49).

Other female characters include Kiswana Browne, Etta Mae Johnson, Cora Lee, and Licielia Louise Turner. The second chapter of the novel, “Etta Mae Johnson,” narrates the story of Etta, Mattie Michael’s friend from Tennessee. Etta fantasizes with becoming the wife of the Reverend of the church Mattie attends. Reverend Woods turns out to only want Etta for “sexual release” (Charles Jr. 40). Etta returns home broken-hearted but instead of criticism from Mattie, she only offers love: “Etta laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her” (Naylor 74). With Etta’s story, Naylor may—again—make a criticism of men’s nature and their consideration of women as objects; that is, as a means to merely alleviate themselves. The story of Kiswana Browne is told in the third chapter, and as Wilson Jr. points out, the chapter does not “focus on women who have been mistreated by men” (40). The character of Kiswana serves as one of the ultimate womanist figures who cares the most for her community. Kiswana “decid[es] to save the tenants of Brewster Place by organizing the residents to rally against their uncaring slumlord” thus establishing coalitions between the women of Brewster Place in order to fight a common end, “wish[ing] to improve the conditions of Brewster Place” (Wilson Jr. 50). It is important to point out that Brewster Place is the home of working-class African Americans and it is precisely this same vulnerability that enables them to finally accomplish what they set out to do: “by the end of the novel . . . the community has rallied together to raise funds to hire an attorney so that their demands are heard within the system” (Wilson Jr. 51). The character of Lucielia Turner is also worth mentioning. Ciel is one of the women of Brewster Place and Miss Eva’s granddaughter. She appears later in the novel now as a

young woman with her daughter, Serena, and an abusive boyfriend called Eugene. When looking at her baby's face "[Ciel's] heart became full as she realized, this is the only thing I have ever loved without pain" (Naylor 93). Indeed, in Ciel's story the reader can see the dynamics of a sexist man toward his wife. Furthermore, the chapter, again, presents the reader with the recurrent topic of motherly and sisterly love when Ciel's daughter dies and "to some degree when Mattie saves Ciel . . . the ritual bathing that she performs on Ciel becomes a testament to the healing powers of sisterly love and bonding" (Wilson Jr. 48). Because Mattie knows how it feels to lose a child, her experience as a mother enables her to empathize with Ciel. Regarding the character of Cora Lee, it is important to point out that this character is the single mother of seven children, most of whom have different fathers. Cora is obsessed with having children and her character could be analyzed as being unable to face the reality that comes with children. Nonetheless, perhaps what is even more interesting is the fact that, for one reason or another, the children have no male figure and Cora has to take care of her children on her own. In addition, Cora's experiences with men are perfectly illustrated in the following excerpt:

But she still carried the scar under her left eye because of a baby's crying, and you couldn't stop a baby from crying . . . and so Sammy and Maybelline's father had to go . . . [There were] no more bruised eyes because of a baby's crying. The thing that felt good in the dark would sometimes bring the new babies, and that's all she cared to know. (Naylor 114)

As one can see, just as many of the aforementioned female characters, Cora has suffered domestic violence. Yet what is perhaps more interesting is the fact that her experience with men has fundamentally been as a device to have children. So, just as Cora Lee has been used as a sexual object by men, she, too, has used men for her benefit and in order to achieve her ultimate goal of having more and more children, thus fighting and taking advantage of her enemy, her oppressor. As Heather Duerre Humann points out, "the physical and emotional abuse perpetrated by Eugene and by Cora Lee's former lover stem from their male desire to control 'their' women" (89).

As one can see, the previous women have suffered male violence in many forms. However, what is more interesting is the fact that, in overcoming the discrimination and oppression, they have exhibited their agency and independence as women by rebelling on their own or by bonding with the other female characters, given their shared vulnerability, against a common oppression.

### 3.2.2. “As Long As They Own the Whole Damn World, It’s Them and Us, Sister”: The Lesbian Black Woman in *The Women of Brewster Place*

As Wilson Jr. points out, “while most of the previous chapters have focused on men’s oppression of women, the sixth chapter is concerned with women’s oppression of other women” (44). As has been seen before with women adopting the discourses of their male counterparts or with black people adopting those of their white counterparts, in “The Two,” “Naylor examines the concept of ‘the oppressed becoming the oppressor,’” in other words, constructing otherness “to feel better than someone else” by focusing on how women oppress other women on account of their sexuality (Wilson Jr. 44).

“The Two” opens with “at first they seemed like such nice girls” (Naylor 129). From the very beginning of the chapter, the reader knows she is entering a whole new side of Brewster Place, just as unknown as frightening. Many of the tenants of the housing complex—specially Sophie—reveal their innermost prejudices, indeed, adopting the role of the oppressor without taking into account that they themselves are being oppressed for their gender and race. As Melancon points out, “the assessment of Theresa and Lorraine is, that their sexual identities as same-sex lovers, as nonheterosexual women, becomes linked to an intrinsic quality that purportedly precludes ‘goodness’ and thereby marks them as ‘anormative,’ aberrant, and far from the ‘sugar and spice and everything nice’ construction of female identity” (175). Lorraine and Theresa—the protagonists of the story—would embody the ultimate vulnerable female figure, so to speak; that is, a lesbian black woman who does not fit in the established heteronormative society she lives in. While Lorraine is much more sensitive to the judgments passed on her, Theresa is not. Lorraine wants to be accepted as she is, “insisting that the larger community see her as being no different from other women/people there.” On the other hand, Theresa “could not care less what others think” and concludes that “she must function in a world controlled by others” (Wilson Jr. 57). Both women, however, possess agency individually “in terms of their autonomy, self-definition, and interiority” (Melancon 178). Certainly, the couple are seen as a threat to the community because of their sexuality, the irony lying in the fact that their relationship is purer than any of the relationships of the ‘normal’ characters. The couple are constructed as the Other, although their only difference with the rest of the African-American women of Brewster Place is their sexual orientation: “So it got around that the two in 312 were *that way*” (Naylor 131; emphasis in original). The situation affects Lorraine profoundly and she tries her best to get along with the rest of

the women of Brewster Place. A related event to consider is when the residents of Brewster Place meet in order to rally against their landlord. Instead of focusing on the matter in question, the character of Sophie takes the opportunity to mention “the bad element that done moved in this block amongst decent people” (139–140). Sophie attempts to put the community of Brewster Place against the couple: “‘What they doin’—livin’ there like that—is wrong, and you know it’” (140). Some characters, however, claim that “they just love each other,” that they just “love each other like you’d love a man” (141). When Lorraine confronts Sophie, she says:

What have any of you ever seen me do except leave my house and go to work like the rest of you? Is it disgusting for me to speak to each one of you that I meet in the street, even when you don’t answer me back? Is that my crime? Lorraine’s voice sank like a silver dagger into their consciences, and there was an uneasy stirring in the room. (145)

The relationship between Lorraine and Ben—the janitor—is also worth mentioning for it serves as a way for Lorraine to feel normal. As Lorraine puts it, “When I’m with Ben, I don’t feel any different from anybody else in the world” (165). Ben is a broken man who serves as an escape from reality for Lorraine—who is as broken. Apart from the discrimination she has to face within her own community, Lorraine is the object of a brutal rape because of her sexuality. As Melancon argues, “the setting in the secluded alley is emblematic of the isolation, emotional and otherwise, that women like Lorraine must endure; and that very isolation lends itself, as Naylor illustrates, to danger and horrendously violent attacks” (182). In brief, Lorraine’s condition of lesbian poses a threat to the men’s manhood: “So Lorraine found herself, on her knees, surrounded by the most dangerous species in existence—human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide” (Naylor 170).

As one can see, it could be argued that Lorraine is the character who suffers the most. Although the reader has not been informed about previous gender- or racial-related discriminations towards Lorraine, it is likely that she has endured them. Moreover, she has to withstand the oppression inside her own community, a community of black women for whom she is the enemy. Lorraine’s death is the outcome of not only the oppression of the patriarchal power in her context, but the oppression embodied by the oppressed of her own community which the text suggest is as bad if not worse. Another reading of “The Two”, however, as literary scholar Marilyn Farwell argues, is that the characters of Lorraine and Theresa “are not primarily victims or outsiders; instead, they form the

metaphoric center of the female bonding that becomes a powerful narrative agent by the end of the text” (qtd. in Melancon 179). Thus, reinforcing Rich’s notion of the “lesbian continuum” (18) and the coalitions between women with a similar experience and same enemy. As American writer, feminist, and activist Audre Lorde points out:

As Black women we have the right and responsibility to define ourselves and to seek our allies in common cause: with Black men against racism, and with each other and white women against sexism. But most of all, as Black women we have the right and responsibility to recognize each other without fear and to love where we choose. Both lesbian and heterosexual Black women today share a history of bonding and strength to which our sexual identities and our other differences must not blind us. (103)

With “The Two” Naylor may be criticizing the African-American community itself, a community which—although being oppressed—may embody the role of oppressor due to certain prejudices as in the story. Indeed, it is only through the bonding Lorde talks about; that is, a bonding free of prejudices, that things can be accomplished.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Indeed, both *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) and *The Color Purple* (1982) depict female characters who are more vulnerable than their male equivalents. Some of these characters, as we have seen, include the heroine of Walker's text, Celie, or Mattie, the most prominent character of Naylor's novel together with the character of Lorraine, which offers an insight into one of the 'ultimate' vulnerable figures. Certainly, the women from these novels suffer oppression and discrimination, which spring from their embodying the figure of the Other—deeply explored by Emmanuel Lévinas—not only for the male figures but in some instances for other female characters. In the novels, aspects such as gender, race, class, and sexuality are crucial to construct otherness, thus vulnerability. Apart from shedding some light on feminist issues such as the discrimination suffered by the female characters of the texts, Walker and Naylor depict characters who—through coalitions and caring—bond in order to fight the patriarchal power they are subjugated to. The paper has hopefully shed some light on the problematics of patriarchal society by dealing with issues which, after the publishing of the novels, still play an important role in our society.

As one can see, the novels share many themes. Male abuse is deeply explored in both novels. A clear difference, perhaps, between the novels in their approach to the theme of abuse is that while Walker suggests that men can be 'saved' from their misogynistic conceptions, Naylor's men find no salvation and are depicted as abusers, rapists, and even—as in the case of Ben—dead throughout. Naylor, however, in *The Men of Brewster Place*, published in 1999, offers her male characters—Ben or Eugene, for instance—a second chance, thus proving Naylor's interest and concern for both genders. The female condition and everything it entails—pregnancy, mothering of other women's children or sisterhood—is thoroughly explored in the texts, making clear that women's position in society compared to that of men is precarious and unequal, being merely considered mules who carry the burden of the household and what it involves. Moreover, the novels shed some light on the problematics of a heteronormative culture where other modes of sexuality are not allowed. In "The Two," Naylor points out the fact that the heteronormative discourse is so powerful that it is even able to make the 'oppressed'—the heterosexual women of Brewster Place—play the role 'oppressor' towards other women. To a lesser degree, race is also explored in the texts, working as a reminder that places such as Brewster Place or the conditions of many characters and behaviors in the texts are influenced by—or have originated from—the supremacy of whiteness.

Through the analyses of *The Color Purple* and *The Women of Brewster Place*, it has hopefully been seen how women work as mirrors for other women to see themselves reflected in and overcome difficulties or find empowerment and care. Nonetheless, when it comes to the men from the novels, the double nature of Otherness is clear. While women feel the responsibility to help the other women they encounter through their life, men regard them as below them and grind them down for being different to them. Nevertheless, in many cases, it is precisely the tyranny of the patriarchal community led by men—who use oppression to reinforce their supremacy in it— which triggers agency, caring for one another, and rebellion in the female characters.

Although it cannot be considered to be a positive outcome—for the women of the novels achieve it through suffering and having to deal with many privations—it could be argued that this is what allows them to morph from merely mules to truckdrivers. Still, the fight for equality is, unfortunately, ongoing, so the women from the novels, who represent those in the real world, will be constant gladiators fighting to be treated as equals, so still regarded as different, mules. The stories of the truckdriver gladiator mules from the novels—given the current significance of the construction of Otherness and the vulnerability it entails—make the reader aware of these aspects and make one play a part in it, perhaps as a way to ask for help; so that hopefully, someday, they may be neither mules nor gladiators but truckdrivers—just as men.

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